



WINNEBAGO COUNTY SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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Winnebago County SWCD Reaches Milestone 70th Anniversary

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This May, the Winnebago County SWCD will have been in existence for 70 years. Originally, the district was formed as the Pecatonica – Durand Soil Conservation District back in May 1940. The district was formed with the prime objective of controlling soil erosion on farmland. A lot has changed since the original Conservation District was formed. Today, our focus is not only on soil erosion on farmland but also erosion in urban areas, whether it be construction sites or streambanks. Also, the term “water” was added to our title. Water quality, whether it be through groundwater or surface water protection and management, are other important elements in our annual plan of operations; as well as the education of all of our natural resources to those within the District.

It’s hard to recount everything that the District has accomplished over the last 70 years, but just looking at the past 20 to 30 years, we can look back at some of the programs and accomplishments we have made.

Let’s start with the Conservation Reserve Program. This program was enacted with the 1986 Farm Bill. It takes sensitive and highly erodible land out of production and puts it into grasses and native vegetation. In the 90’s newer programs and initiatives included filter strips which helps to improve water quality by reducing sediment and nutrients that run off from adjacent cropland; and wetland restoration which allows wetlands to once again properly function in storing and cleaning floodwaters, also improving the quality of our surface waters. Currently there are over **9,200** acres enrolled in various Conservation Reserve Program practices. These practices reduce the amount of sediment washing from the fields and going into our waterways by over **35,000** tons per year.

Another portion of the 1986 Farm Bill was to establish conservation plans on all highly erodible cropland within the District. We have about 179,200 acres of cropland in the District and roughly 100,000 acres are considered highly erodible land, which requires regular monitoring and maintenance of conservation practices such as

waterways and terraces, some of which are cost-shared by various state and federal programs. Annually, we cost-share about \$50,000 on these various conservation practices. Other conservation practices used by farmers, such as no-till and mulch till, reduce the sheet and rill erosion on cropland by 4 to 8 tons per acre per year. A ton of soil per acre can be compared to the thickness of a sheet of paper covering the size of a football field. With the number of highly erodible acres in the County, that can add up in a hurry.

Soils – We started conducting soils borings, often referred to as “perk tests” for the County Health Department in 1978, so that individual septic systems are placed on suitable soils and are properly sized. Soil mapping is also done for planned subdivision, so that lots are placed on suitable soils. All of this work helps to protect our groundwater supply from contamination. Since the program started, we have evaluated well over 7,000 sites for septic suitability, and have mapped well over 7,000 acres.

Zoning and Land Use – The district completes Natural Resource Information Reports for all developments or changes in zoning within the County and Municipalities. The purpose of these reports are to provide the appropriate agency with all of the natural resource information available for a parcel so that they can make wise decisions regarding land use changes. The overall goal is to protect and preserve our prime farmland.

Tree Sale - We have also had a spring tree sale since sometime in the 70’s as well. This is an opportunity for people in the community to plant inexpensive bare root seedlings. The use of evergreens can act as windbreaks, which can block winter winds and reduce heating costs, hardwoods and flowering and fruit-bearing shrubs provide wildlife habitat and food sources. Trees and shrubs also help clean the air by absorbing carbon dioxide. Over the last 30 years, we have provided close to 600,000 trees and shrubs to the community

Groundwater Quality – The protection of our groundwater resources has always been important, especially as we become more aware of how the chemicals and fertilizers we use interact with and move thru the soil, and how they may impact our groundwater. We promote the annual testing of well water and work with the County Health Department and other groups to make sure that abandoned wells are properly sealed.

Construction Site inspection – Soil erosion from construction sites has been a concern of the district since the early 90’s. Construction sites often have accelerated erosion rates due to mass grading and long durations of bare soil. Thru agreements with the IEPA and the County, we have annually inspected over 75 sites over the last eight years. Without erosion control practices in place, it is estimated that 1 ½ dump truck loads of soil per acre can erode from the average construction site.

Education – The District provides educational resources and opportunities to thousands of people annually. Staff makes classroom visits on resource topics such as soils, geology, wetlands, conservation, and fossils. Wildlife, macro-invertebrates, prairies, forests, and biodiversity are other subject matters offered. Workshops have also been offered in the areas of wildlife management, conservation tillage, sediment and erosion control, planning and land use, and backyard conservation tips. Our quarterly newsletter and news releases are other ways in which we distribute information.

There are several other programs, activities and responsibilities that the District is involved with on a regular basis, to numerous to include in this article, and they only continue to expand. We serve an essential role in the agricultural community, and are becoming a much more integral part in the urban and suburban sectors. As the needs of those within the district change, and programs we administer expand and change, the district and its staff will do our best to keep up to the task. We have the knowledge and commitment to continue our role from the past into the future, and hopefully carry on the roles and responsibilities of the Winnebago County SWCD for another 70 years.